

Message Text

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SUBJECT: THE ECHEVERRIA-LOPEZ PORTILLO TRANSITION: THINKING

ABOUT THE UNTHINKABLE

1. SUMMARY: RUMORS ARE GROWING HERE THAT PRESIDENT ECHEVERRIA
MAY BE PLOTTING ASSASSINATION OF PRESIDENT-ELECT LOPEZ PORTILLO
TO EXTEND HIS OWN TERM OF OFFICE. WHILE WE CONTINUE TO REGARD
RUMORS AS MERELY SYMPTOMATIC OF SUSPICION WITH WHICH MEXICANS
REGARD PRESIDENT RATHER THAN ACTUAL FOREKNOWLEDGE, THEY HAVE
BEEN PERSISTENT ENOUGH TO WARRANT OUR SPECULATION IN THIS
REPORT ON POSSIBLE SCENARIO AND IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S.

END SUMMARY.

2. ONE OF THE CASUALTIES OF THE EXCELSIOR COUP WAS PLURAL, AN
EXCELSIOR-OWNED SOPHISTICATED JOURNAL OF THE ARTS AND POLITICS.
EDITED BY OCTAVIO PAZ AND RUN BY THE SAME WRITERS AND INTEL-

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LECTUALS WHO LEFT EXCELSIOR WITH SCHERER, PLURAL PUBLISHED IN

JULY ITS FINAL EDITION. THIS ALONE WOULD MAKE IT A COLLECTOR'S ITEM BUT A POSTHUMOUS ARTICLE IN IT (WRITTEN IN JANUARY 1976) BY THE LATE DANIEL COSIO VILLEGAS, MEXICO'S FOREMOST HISTORIAN, POLITICAL SCIENTIST AND POLITICAL OBSERVER, HAS MADE IT VIRTUALLY UNOBTAINABLE.

3. SPEAKING FROM THE GRAVE IN A NOW GUTTED JOURNAL WHICH TOGETHER WITH EXCELSIOR REPRESENTED (HOWEVER INFURIATING AT TIMES) THE BEST OF MEXICO'S RATHER OBSEQUIOUS PRESS, COSIO WRITES FORTHRIGHTLY OF THE SUBJECT WHICH IS USUALLY DISCUSSED HERE ONLY GUARDEDLY AMONG CLOSE FRIENDS-THE PRESIDENT'S AMBITION TO RETAIN POLITICAL POWER. COSIO REMINDS HIS READERS THAT THE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM-THAT AN OUTGOING PRESIDENT GRADUALLY RELINQUISHES HIS POWER TO HIS SUCCESSOR AS THE END OF HIS TERM OF OFFICE APPROACHES- HAS NOT ALWAYS BEEN CORRECT. HE ANALYZES THE CARDENAS-AVILA CAMACHO TRANSITION AS AN EXAMPLE OF A PRESIDENT REFUSING TO CEDE POLITICAL AUTHORITY AND THEN PROCEEDS TO FIND SIMILARITY BETWEEN IT AND THE PRESENT TRANSITION. COSIO CITES FAMILIAR INDICATORS OF THE PRESIDENT'S BID FOR POWER RETENTION - HIS SURROUNDING LOPEZ PORTILLO WITH HIS OWN ADVISERS, PACKING THE NEXT LEGISLATURE WITH CLOSE SUPPORTERS, JLP'S CAUTIOUS CAMPAIGN - AND CONCLUDES THAT ECHEVERRIA WILL RETAIN SOMETHING LIKE SEVENTY PERCENT OF HIS PRESENT AUTHORITY IN THE PERIOD IMMEDIATELY AFTER JLP'S INAUGURATION. COSIO ALSO INSERTS AN OMINOUS PARENTHETICAL QUALIFICATION ABOUT HIS PREDICTION - "PROVIDED THAT SOMETHING GROTESQUE AND UNFORESEEN DOES NOT OCCUR."

4. COSIO'S REFERENCE IS TO A FEAR WHICH WE HAVE HEARD INCREASINGLY IN RECENT WEEKS - THAT LOPEZ PORTILLO MIGHT BE ASSASSINATED BEFORE HE TAKES OFFICE. THE AMBASSADOR FIRST HEARD THIS SHORTLY AFTER JLP'S NOMINATION, AND PERIODICALLY SINCE THEN. RUMORS AND FEARS OF THIS KIND ARE NOW BEING WHISPERED MORE FREQUENTLY. TWO WEEKS AGO A STORY THAT JLP HAD BEEN SHOT SWEPT THE CITY IN AN AFTERNOON. IN THE LAST TWO OR THREE DAYS WE HAVE HEARD THE FEARS FROM SEVERAL SOURCES, ONE A VISITING BUSINESSMAN WHO MAY BE CLOSE TO FRIENDS OF THE CANDIDATE. THIS LATTER STORY SUGGESTED THE PRESIDENT AND KEY MILITARY OFFICERS WERE FORMING SUCH A PLOT AND THAT THE "ACCIDENT" WOULD BE BLAMED ON THE CIA. ON AUGUST 4, EMBASSY
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LEGATT OBTAINED EXACTLY SAME STORY FROM DIFFERENT PERSON, ALTHOUGH SOURCE IN LOPEZ PORTILLO CAMP COULD BE THE SAME. WHILE MOST OF THESE RUMORS HAVE COME FROM THE PRIVATE SECTOR, THE AREA MOST WILLING TO ACCEPT THAT ECHEVERRIA WOULD BE CAPABLE OF MURDER TO EXTEND HIS MANDATE, WE ARE NOW PICKING UP SIMILAR EXPRESSIONS OF CONCERN FROM THE ACADEMIC COMMUNITY.

5. WE HAVE LONG REGARDED SUCH TALK AS SYMPTOMATIC OF THE

POLITICAL CLIMATE, THE CYNICISM AND SUSPICION WITH WHICH MEXICANS REGARD THE PRESIDENT RATHER THAN AS AN INDICATION OF WHAT MIGHT ACTUALLY HAPPEN. AND CERTAINLY WE ARE NOT YET READY TO CHANGE THAT JUDGEMENT. BUT BECAUSE SIMILAR PRECEDENTS IN MODERN MEXICAN HISTORY EXIST (OBREGON, BROTHER-IN-LAW OF AVILA CAMACHO, AND PERHAPS MADRAZO) AND BECAUSE THE CONSEQUENCES FOR THE UNITED STATES OF SUCH A HYPOTHETICAL EVENTUALITY ARE SO PROFOUND, SOME DISCUSSION IS WARRANTED.

6. A HYPOTHETICAL SCENARIO:

ARTICLE 85 OF THE MEXICAN CONSTITUTION PROVIDES THAT "IF THE PRESIDENT-ELECT DOES NOT PRESENT HIMSELF" ON INAUGURATION DAY, THE MEXICAN CONGRESS SHALL APPOINT AN INTERIM PRESIDENT PENDING NEW ELECTIONS TO BE HELD BETWEEN FOURTEEN TO EIGHTEEN MONTHS AFTER HIS SELECTION. WHILE THE PRESENT CONGRESS (1973-1976 CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES, 1970-1976 SENATE) HAS CERTAINLY BORN AN ECHEVERRIA STAMP, THE 1976-1979 CHAMBER AND 1976-1982 SENATE WILL DO SO EVEN MORE. THAT CONGRESS WAS ELECTED JULY 4 AND WILL BE SEATED SEPTEMBER 1. THUS THE MOST LOGICAL TIMING OF AN ACCIDENT WOULD BE AFTER SEPTEMBER 1. PRESUMABLY, TO CARRY OUT THIS SCENARIO, THE CONGRESS WOULD APPOINT ONE OF THE PRESIDENT'S MOST LOYAL AND SUBSERVIENT FOLLOWERS, A CERVANTES DEL RIO, GOMEZ VILLANUEVA, OR MUÑOZ LEDO, ALL FORMER CABINET OFFICERS WHOM ECHEVERRIA NAMED TO THE TOP PARTY POSITIONS. IN THIS SCENARIO, THE CONSTITUTION WOULD BE FOLLOWED BUT ECHEVERRIA WOULD CONTINUE TO RULE THROUGH SOMEONE MORE MALLEABLE THAN JLP HAS PROVED TO BE. ONE COULD ALSO SPECULATE ALTERNATIVELY THAT CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS PROHIBITING THE PRESIDENT FROM EXTENDING HIS TERM MIGHT INSTEAD BE AMENDED BEFORE DECEMBER 1.

7. SHOULD THE PRESIDENT BE EVEN CONTEMPLATING SUCH ACTION, HE WOULD HAVE TO BE CONFIDENT OF TWO THINGS: ACQUIESCENCE OF SECRET

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KEY POWER CENTERS, AND A PLAUSIBLE (IF NOT CREDIBLE) SCAPEGOAT FOR THE ASSASSINATION. THE KEY POWER CENTERS WOULD INCLUDE FIRST OF ALL THE MILITARY AND ORGANIZED LABOR LEADERSHIP, THEN THE PRI LEADERSHIP, AND LASTLY KEY MEMBERS OF THE PRIVATE SECTOR. WE WOULD NOT RULE OUT HIS RECEIVING THE SUPPORT OF ANY OF THOSE EXCEPT POSSIBLY THE LAST. MEXICO'S TOPMOST MILITARY MEN ARE ECHEVERRIA LOYALISTS. THE PARTY LEADERSHIP IS COMPLETELY HIS OWN. WITH LABOR CZAR FIDEL VELAZQUEZ THE PRESIDENT HAS HAD AN ON AGAIN OFF AGAIN COOPERATIVE RELATIONSHIP WHICH IS PRESENTLY ON AND WHICH HAS BEEN VERY BENEFICIAL TO BOTH. VELAZQUEZ' ACQUIESCENCE AND SUPPORT IN A MOMENT OF "NATIONAL TRAGEDY" IS PROBABLE. THE MOST PRACTICAL RESTRAINT ON THE PRESIDENT ADOPTING SUCH A COURSE WOULD BE THE POSSIBILITY THAT THE RESULTING POLITICAL CRISIS WOULD SEVERELY WRENCH THE NATION'S ECONOMY. WE DO NOT BELIEVE THIS PROSPECT IN ITSELF WOULD DETER ECHEVERRIA

FROM ACTING, AND INDEED IT WOULD PROVIDE REASON FOR THE "REVOLUTIONARY FAMILY", WHICH INCLUDES THE PRIVATE SECTOR, TO COALESCE TO RESTORE CONFIDENCE ONCE PRESENTED WITH A FAIT ACCOMPLI. ANOTHER POSSIBLE RESTRAINT, PRESS OPPOSITION, WEAK IN ANY CASE, IS SINCE THE EXCELSIOR COUP NO LONGER A POTENTIAL PROBLEM.

8. THE PLAUSIBLE SCAPEGOAT FOR THE DEMISE OF LOPEZ PORTILLO COULD BE THE TERRORIST 23 OF SEPTEMBER COMMUNIST LEAGUE, A GROUP WHICH THE PRESIDENT HAS PREVIOUSLY SUGGESTED IS REALLY CONTROLLED BY REACTIONARY DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN FORCES (READ CIA). IF ANYTHING SHOULD HAPPEN TO LOPEZ PORTILLO, THE ONLY CERTAINTY IS THAT THE UNITED STATES WILL SOMEHOW GET SOME OF THE BLAME.

9. IN CONCLUSION, WE EMPHASIZE THAT IN THIS REPORT WE HAVE GIVEN FREE REIN TO A FLIGHT OF SPECULATIVE FANCY. WE HAVE NO RPT NO CONCRETE REASON TO BELIEVE THAT SUCH A SCENARIO IS IN THE OFFING. OBVIOUSLY, HOWEVER, THE PERSISTENCE AND INSISTENCE OF RUMORS OF POSSIBLE FOUL PLAY HAS LED US AT LEAST TO CONTEMPLATE THE UNTHINKABLE AND TO SHARE OUR THOUGHTS WITH THE DEPARTMENT.

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